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# "Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - Growing Pains in Honors Education: Two Courses Designed to Build Community

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Growing Pains in Honors Education: Two Courses Designed to Build Community

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Honors programs and colleges that seek substantial growth face a number of challenges. Two of the most prominent are maintaining a strong sense of community within the honors student population and finding sufficient faculty to teach honors courses. A different, but not entirely unrelated, challenge is presented by part-time students, some of whom may be excellent candidates for honors but whose outside commitments make it impossible for them to carry a full course load or regularly attend classes during business hours. In what follows, I will provide an overview of two honors courses whose design can help meet the two primary challenges, while the description of the second course also addresses ways to eliminate obstacles in welcoming and retaining part-time students. Both courses have been developed at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM), a regional comprehensive university with a substantial number of first-generation, commuter, and part-time

students and an honors program in the midst of a five-year plan to grow from forty to approximately 150 students.

### **COURSE #1:**

#### **SOMETIMES BIGGER REALLY IS BETTER**

One of the strengths of an honors community composed of just a few dozen students is that it is fairly easy for everyone to know each other. First-year students routinely mingle with upper-class students, friendships are built, and networks are formed—frequently without any intentional efforts on the part of administrators. It just happens. This phenomenon was certainly our experience at AUM, where, for several years, only one honors seminar could be offered per semester. With students needing six such seminars to graduate from the honors program, inevitably our courses would feature a healthy mix of students at all levels.

When we began to offer two or more seminars each semester, the dynamics changed. Like the curricula of many honors programs, ours included courses at the first-year, sophomore, and junior levels, and the first-year-level courses satisfy a different requirement in the university's core curriculum than the sophomore- and junior-level courses. In practice, running multiple seminars meant that first-year students would never, or almost never, interact with a sophomore or junior in their honors classes and that the sense of community and comradery that had been a defining characteristic of the AUM honors program was now more difficult to achieve.

In response, honors faculty at AUM experimented with a new approach in the spring 2017 semester. Flexibility in the content of our curriculum made it possible to use the same set of core readings—a humanities anthology titled *Being Human*, edited by Leon Kass—in both the sophomore seminar (HONR 2757) and the freshman seminar (HONR 1757). Separate syllabi were created for the two classes, reflecting that HONR 1757 is intended to emphasize breadth and to replace the standard freshman composition sequence at AUM, while HONR 2757 is intended to emphasize depth and substitute for a core curriculum humanities course.

Both syllabi stressed group work, and the classes were scheduled to meet at the same time. One of classes was assigned to a large classroom capable of seating sixty people. The other was assigned to a smaller classroom just down the hall. Our first few meetings were held jointly: fifty-two students and four faculty all assembled in the larger of the two rooms. Among other things, this arrangement gave the faculty an opportunity to explain and model as a team how the mechanics of the two courses would work. During the third class meeting, the four instructors participated in a faculty fishbowl.

For the first two-thirds of the semester, HONR 1757 and HONR 2757 utilized the same calendar. Three class meetings were devoted to discussing each of six chapters selected from our textbook, and students in both sections were required to write short reflection essays on each topic prior to our in-class discussions. Each time we moved from one chapter in the textbook to another, students were assigned to a new small group of four to six people. Roughly half of the groups would be sent to the second of the two classrooms, and students in both rooms spent most of the class period discussing each other's work and the themes of the assigned chapter. The four professors—a biologist, a counselor, a philosopher, and a specialist in Victorian literature—occasionally gave brief mini-lectures on salient topics, but they served primarily as *ad hoc* members of the students' groups, moving from one to another and participating in the conversations as appropriate.

The most interesting aspect of the course proved to be the group work that was produced. In addition to engaging in peer review, each of the small groups was required to submit a packet of materials that included rough and final drafts of each member's reading journal as well as a synthesis of the group's discussions. These syntheses took an extraordinarily wide array of forms, from traditional essays to jigsaw puzzles and music videos. Here are the instructions (to speak generously) and assessment criteria that were provided:

What should a group submission look like in this course?  
It's hard to say. But here are some things your professors  
will have in mind, based on your suggestions. . . .<sup>1</sup>

An HONR 1757/2757 group project that merits an ‘A’

- is well-organized; it’s easy for the person grading it to figure out how it’s been assembled; the various components fit together in a clear and natural way
- is nice to look at
- includes polished, well-edited, aesthetically pleasing, and grammatically correct summaries, overviews, or transcripts of the group’s discussions
- demonstrates that each member of the group contributed, and that each individual’s ideas were taken seriously; it’s obvious that rough drafts of reading journals were a principal topic of discussion
- reveals original, thought-provoking, and occasionally box-up-blowing<sup>2</sup> insights into the assigned material, perhaps expressed in a medium other than prose
- includes serious discussion of multiple points of view concerning a range of topics
- probably shows that the group members made thoughtful text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections; ‘A’ submissions frequently include citations of sources beyond our textbook
- makes it clear that the group functioned effectively as a team

Every student in each group played a distinct role: boss, scribe, editor, commentator, or “red shirt.” (A red shirt is a person with no particular responsibilities; the label was chosen as a nod to both the nameless members of the *Enterprise* crew on *Star Trek* and to the stars-in-waiting of college football.) The expectation was that each student in the class would play each of these roles at least once during the semester, but that was not a strict requirement.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, the principal rationale for combining the two sections and for placing such a strong emphasis on group work was to encourage students to get to know people with whom they might

not otherwise have engaged. Overstating how successful we were in achieving this goal would be difficult. Concurrently, the course merger and group projects helped fulfill several of our program's learning outcomes. New honors students had valuable opportunities to learn from veterans of the program and to cultivate their creative-thinking skills, and everyone enrolled in the course spent substantial time as a member or leader of a team.

A secondary, and unexpected, benefit of this approach is that it provided an effective strategy for stretching faculty resources. In general, AUM honors seminars have a student-to-faculty ratio of 10:1 or lower. With fifty-two students and four professors, the HONR 1757/2757 course described here was slightly above this target (13:1). One upshot of the course design is that the ratio actually felt much lower; the amount of time spent in small groups enabled the faculty members to engage with students in greater depth (albeit for shorter stretches of time) than would have been possible otherwise. The more of this interaction, the better, of course; adding a fifth or even a sixth professor to HONR 1757/2757 would only have enhanced the experience. Pragmatically speaking, however, just two faculty members could have managed the course effectively. Indeed, with a sufficiently large space in which to meet, it would not be out of the question for one professor to do satisfactory work in an honors mega-seminar organized in this fashion. Although that arrangement would be far from ideal, and perhaps not sustainable over the long haul, it could work when emergency course-staffing situations arise.

## **COURSE #2:**

### **FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES, ROBUST ENGAGEMENT**

The HONR 1757/2757 course just described was developed in response to concerns over how to incorporate a significant number of new students into an existing honors community. A different, but not unrelated, challenge is posed by students who are honors-eligible but cannot take a full-time course load during a particular semester (or even for a year or more) because of outside commitments. If students' outside commitments include a full-time job, attending

classes scheduled in the middle of the day may be impossible for them, exacerbating the problem. At many institutions, including AUM, such students can often make progress toward honors graduation by converting traditional and evening courses into contract courses to earn honors credit, but those students may not have any interaction with their honors peers in an academic context.

One opportunity for these students to build relationships with other honors students is taking the Honors Colloquium (HONR 1957), which is a one-credit hour, pass/fail course. This course is frequently taught by university administrators and leaders with whom our students might not otherwise have an opportunity to interact, although in some incarnations members of our Fine Arts faculty teach the class. A section of HONR 1957 can take any of three forms: a “cultural experiences” course in which students attend concerts, plays, museums, and the like (hence the connection to Fine Arts); a service-learning course; or a “book-of-the-month club” course, in which the instructor of record selects between two and five works that he or she believes to be particularly interesting, important, or otherwise worthwhile.

When taught by a high-level administrator, such as our university’s chancellor, the vice-chancellor for strategic initiatives, an associate provost, or one of the deans, HONR 1957 gives all of the students enrolled a unique opportunity to engage with institutional leaders and gain a deeper understanding of the university as a whole. For present purposes, what is important to note is the particular advantage for part-time students: these courses usually meet just six to ten times per semester, and those meetings are frequently scheduled on a flexible basis to accommodate as many members of the class as possible. In cultural experience-based sections of the course, instructors typically identify eight events, and each student must attend four of them plus four lecture/discussion meetings. In the service-learning courses, projects are typically scheduled outside of regular business hours; only a few class meetings are held for purposes of planning and assessment. And in book-of-the-month club sections, participants meet roughly twice a month, sometimes over a meal, to discuss the material they have been reading. In this iteration a student who enrolls in the course will have a traditional

honors academic experience and will interact in meaningful ways with fellow honors students, but orchestrated in a manner that is compatible with the demands imposed by a family, career, or other extracurricular commitments. The scenario, of course, is not ideal; no one would dispute that taking as many genuine honors courses as possible is better for an honors student. For students without that option, however, the honors colloquium represents a satisfactory compromise between the alternatives of all or nothing.

## THE BENEFITS OF SUCCESS

The creative approaches of HONR 1757/2757 and HONR 1957 in the AUM honors curriculum have helped the program solve the challenges of building and maintaining community, staffing honors courses with engaged instructors, and providing opportunities for part-time students to be vital members of the program. The courses have been strong, welcome additions to the array of opportunities we offer our honors students.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The very first group project of the semester required the students to develop proposals for what the assessment criteria would be.

<sup>2</sup>This is not a typo; it merits some explaining. The unofficial slogan of the AUM Honors Program, coined by retired director Donald Nobles, is “Some people think outside the box; we blow the box up.” The language of “box-up-blowing” has thereby entered our lexicon.

<sup>3</sup>Together, the students’ reading journals (35%) and group submissions (20%) represented 55% of their course grades. Other assignments included a “textless response” to an assigned reading and a substantive term paper, but neither of these is connected in any important way to the merging of two sections, so they are not discussed here.

## WORK CITED

Kass, Leon, editor. *Being Human*. Norton, 2004.



